

LATVIA IN BRIEF

The Republic of Latvia was founded in 1918 on the coast of the Baltic Sea, in a territory that has been home to the Latvian language and culture for thousands of years.

Republic of Latvia LATVIJAS REPUBLIKA

Latvian: Latvija
Lithuanian: Latvija
Estonian: Läti
German: Lettland
French: Lettonie
Spanish: Letonia
Russian: Латвия
Swedish: Latvia
Chinese: 拉脫維亞
Japanese: ラトビア
Arabic: ليفتال

COUNTRY CODE: LV
CALLING CODE: +371
INTERNET TLD: .LV (.EU)
TIME ZONE: EET (UTC+2) EEST (UTC+3)
WEIGHTS AND MEASURES: Metric

The Republic of Latvia was founded on November 18, 1918. Despite occupations and rule by the Soviet Union (1940-1941, 1945-1991) and Nazi Germany (1941-1945), Latvia has been continuously recognized as a sovereign state since 1920. On May 4, 1990, the Singing Revolution was crowned by the Declaration of Independence, which initiated a transition period. On August 21,

1991, Latvia regained full independence. Re-establishing international diplomatic ties and joining the United Nations followed suit. Latvia was admitted to the WTO in 1998 and became a member of the European Union and NATO in 2004.

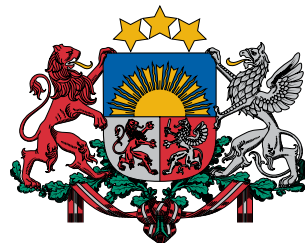
The name "Latvija" comes from the ancient Latgallians, one of four Indo-European Baltic tribes, who along with Couronians, Selonians, and Semigallians formed the ethnic core of today's Latvian people.

NATIONAL HOLIDAY

November 18, the date of the proclamation of Latvia's independence in 1918.

THE COAT OF ARMS

Latvia's coat of arms combines the traditional heraldic symbols of Latvian statehood and national identity – three stars, the sun, the sea, and oak leaves. Latvia's historical districts of Kurzeme and Zemgale are represented by a red lion, while Vidzeme and Latgale are depicted by a silver griffin.



THE FLAG

The maroon-white-maroon flag of Latvia is one of the oldest in the world and dates back to a battle near Cēsis in the 13th century. According to a legend, the flag originated from a white sheet used to carry a mortally wounded Latvian tribal chief from the battlefield. Soaked with his blood on two sides, the warrior's sheet was hoisted as a banner and led his soldiers to victory.



GEOGRAPHY

Latvia is the central country of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and is located in northeastern Europe on the east coast of the Baltic Sea. The country's geographic coordinates are 57°00'N latitude and 25°00'E longitude. Latvia's territory consists of fertile lowland plains and moderate hills, with most of its territory around 100 meters above sea level. The country has vast forested areas, an extensive network of rivers, thousands of lakes, and hundreds of kilometers of virgin seashore lined by pine growths, dunes, and white sandy beaches.

LOCATION

Latvia is bordered by Estonia to the north, Russia to the east, Lithuania to the south, and the Baltic Sea to the west. The country's strategic location has made it an international crossroad for trade, commerce, and cultural exchange since ancient times. Vikings followed the 'Amber Road' through Latvian territory along the Daugava River to reach Byzantium and the Mediterranean Sea. Today, Latvia has become the Eastern border of the European Union and a busy transit crossing due to its ice-free ports, railways, and Riga airport.

Area: 64,589 sq.km or 24,937 sq.miles
Regions: Kurzeme, Zemgale, Vidzeme, Latgale
Total national border length: 1,862 km
Length of Latvia's Baltic coastline: 494 km
Largest lake: Lubāns, 80.7 sq.km
Deepest lake: Drīdzis, 65.1 metres
Longest river within Latvian territory: the Gauja, 452 km

Largest river to flow through Latvian territory: the Daugava, with a total length of 1,005 km (352 km within Latvian territory)
Highest point: Gaiziņkalns, 311.6 metres
1 km = 0.62 mile; 1 m = 39.37 inches



NATURE

With over 44 percent of its territory covered by forests, a vast network of free-flowing rivers, and thousands of lakes, Latvia is one of Europe's best-preserved havens for a wide variety of wildlife. Over 27 thousand species of flora and fauna thrive in natural settings that are still relatively undisturbed by man. Many rare species, such as the black stork and lesser spotted eagle, make their homes in Latvia's mixed forests, marshes, and meadows. There is also an abundance of otters, beavers, lynx, and wolves in Latvia, as well as a great concentration of deer, elk, fox, and wild boar. Bird-watching is particularly rewarding in Latvia, especially in the coastal areas and wetlands during annual migration periods.



- **Summer:** June - August
- **Winter:** December - February
- **Average temperature:**
Summer: 15.8°C (in the capital, 16.1°C)
Winter -4.5°C (in the capital, -3.8°C)
- **Warmest month:** July
- **Coldest month:** January
- **Average precipitation:**
In summer: 195 mm
In winter: 116 mm

CLIMATE

Latvia's weather features a temperate maritime climate, with mild summers, moderate winters, and frequently high levels of humidity and precipitation.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Latvia has proportional representation based on party lists and a 5% vote threshold. There is universal suffrage for Latvian citizens over the age of 18.

FOREIGN POLICY

Latvia joined the European Union and NATO in 2004. The country has been an active member both in promoting global security and prosperity as well as in reducing crises and conflict. Cooperation with its neighbors in the Baltic Sea region is a priority for Latvia, and development of strategic global ties is a goal.



POPULATION

Latvians are the indigenous people of Latvia, and the Finno-Ugric Livs (or Livonians) are the only indigenous minority. Latvia's present ethnic mix is largely a result of massive post-war immigration, which has resulted in a decline in the share of ethnic Latvians from 77% in 1935 to 59% in 2009.

Population in 2010: 2,248,374
Urban: 66%. Rural: 32%

Ethnic composition:

Latvian: 59%
Russian: 27%
Belorussian: 3.6%
Ukrainian: 2.5%
Polish: 2.3%
Lithuanian: 1.3 %
Other nationalities: 3.3%

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: LATVIAN

Latvian is a language of the Balt group which belongs to the Indo-European language family. Its only linguistic relative is Lithuanian, considered to be among the oldest and least changed of all living Indo-European languages in the world. It is estimated that 1.5 million people worldwide use Latvian as their primary language. English and Russian are widely spoken throughout Latvia, while German, French, and the Scandinavian languages are also frequently heard.

GOVERNMENT

Latvia is a democratic, parliamentary republic. Legislative power is in the hands of a single chamber, the Saeima, which has 100 deputies. Parliamentary elections are held every 4 years. Latvia's head of state, the President, is elected by the Saeima for a period of 4 years. The President signs laws, nominates the Prime Minister to be approved by the Saeima, and performs representative functions.



EDUCATION

Latvia has traditionally had one of the highest per capita ratios of students in the world. The state guarantees free primary and secondary school education and offers scholarships for higher education. Foreign students from EU countries pay the same fees as permanent residents of Latvia, and degrees from Latvian educational institutions are recognized internationally. Doctorates can be received in the social sciences, natural sciences, law, as well as technical and humanitarian sciences. Latvia also has state-financed ethnic minority schools, where classes are taught in Belorussian, Estonian, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Polish, Roma, Russian, and Ukrainian.



LARGEST RELIGIOUS CONFESSIONS:

Evangelic Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Russian Orthodox. Since the 16th century Reformation, the Lutheran church has played a leading role in Latvia.



THE CAPITAL, RĪGA

Latvia's political, economic, and culture center is Riga, where more than one third of Latvia's population (703,000) lives and works. Riga's elegant Old Town and distinctive Art Nouveau architecture serve as a stimulating setting for a vibrant modern business and cultural life. Founded in 1201, this former Hanseatic League member is one of the oldest medieval cities in Europe and has been listed by UNESCO as one of the world's most important cultural and architectural sites. As a star of the dynamic Baltic Sea region, Riga has hosted NATO summit, world hockey championships, the Eurovision Song Contest, and many other large-scale international events. Riga International Airport is one of the fastest growing travel hubs in Europe.



CITIES AND TOWNS:

Latvia has a total of 110 municipalities. The largest cities in Latvia are: Riga, Daugavpils, Liepāja, Jelgava, Jūrmala, Ventspils, Rēzekne, Valmiera, and Jēkabpils, which serve as regional centers for 498 rural communities and 65 towns.



PORTS

Latvia's three major ports – Rīga, Ventspils, and Liepāja – service a wide range of global shipping needs. Ventspils is one of the busiest ports in the Baltic Sea region and one of Europe's leading ports in terms of cargo turnover.



TRADE

The countries of the EU remain Latvia's main trading partners (77.8 % in 2009), followed by the CIS countries (13.9% in 2009). Wood and metal products, agricultural goods, machinery, electrical equipment, and chemical products are Latvia's main exports.

FINANCIAL SECTOR

The Bank of Latvia is the central bank of Latvia and a participant of the European System of Central Banks. Since Latvia joined the EU, more than 20 commercial banks have been operating in the country, offering a full array of banking services. Many banks have established an extensive network of ATMs throughout the country and offer international Internet and mobile banking services.

CURRENCY

Name: **Lats**

Code: **LVL**

Symbol: **Ł**

Latvia's national currency is the lats, consisting of 100 santims. Banknotes have nominal values of 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, and 500 lats, while coins have nominal values of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, and 50 santims, and 1, 2, and 100 lats. The lats was reintroduced in 1993 and has been one of Europe's most stable and secure currencies.

PRODUCTION SECTORS

Information technologies, chemical and pharmaceutical industries, electronics, mechanical engineering, timber and construction, food processing, textiles, fishery, and agriculture.



LATVIAN FOODS

Among Latvia's traditionally most popular national foods are caraway cheese, gray peas with bacon, bacon-filled pastries, and a special rye bread prepared according to ancient recipes. Latvian rye bread is a staple for most of the population, and a loaf of this delicious bread is one of Latvia's most popular food "souvenirs."



"Jāņi" - THE MOST LATVIAN HOLIDAY

In Latvia, the celebration of the summer solstice is the oldest and most beloved traditional holiday. The nearly three-day-long midsummer fest culminates on June 24, the day known to Latvians as Jāņi. Most leave the cities to gather with family and friends around bonfires, where special foods, beverages, songs, dances, and rituals enrich the celebration of the setting and rising of the midsummer sun.



DISTINGUISHED INDIVIDUALS

WRITER: Rainis (real name Jānis Pliekšāns, 1865-1929), Latvia's most distinguished and celebrated writer of poetry and plays, also named Latvia's "Man of the 20th Century."

COMPOSERS, MUSICIANS: Pēteris Vasks (1946) since the 1990s has been recognized as one of the world's leading contemporary composers. **Mariss Jansons** (1943) and **Andris Nelsons** (1978) are two of the most celebrated conductors on global stages. The choirs State Choir **Latvija** and **Kamēr...** have been the winners of numerous international festivals and contests.

PAINTERS: Mark Rothko (1903-1970), born in Eastern Latvia, is considered one of the preeminent artists of his generation and viewed as the pioneer of Abstract Expressionism. **Janis Rozentāls** (1866-1916) and **Vilhelms Purvītis** (1872-1945), the most widely recognized and respected Latvian painters, founded the Latvian school of painting.

SCIENTIST: Viktors Kalnbērzs (1928) was the first to perform full gender reassignment surgery in the former Soviet Union, and developed the technique that is still in use today.

ATHLETES: Jānis Lūsis (1939), the only Latvian athlete (javelin) to win all three Olympic medals – gold, silver, and bronze. **Māris Štrombergs** (1987), the first ever Olympic BMX champion. **Artūrs Irbe** (1967), an NHL veteran and member of the International Ice Hockey Federation Hall of Fame. **Ineta Radēviča** (1981), gold medal in women's long jump at the 2010 European Athletics Champion, bronze at the 2011 World Championships in Athletics. **Vadims Vasiļevskis** (1982), silver medal in men's javelin throw at the 2004 Summer Olympics.

POPULAR MUSIC: Raimonds Pauls (1936), composer and pianist who has written over 500 songs and compositions, many recorded internationally. **Brainstorm**, the most popular and widely touring Latvian pop band, founded in 1989. **Instrumenti**, a new electro indie-pop duo composed of two classically trained musicians, whose debut album was recorded at the famous Greenhouse Studios in Iceland.

Latvia on www

Government

Chancery of the President
<http://www.president.lv>
Saeima, the Parliament of Latvia
<http://www.saeima.lv>
Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia
<http://www.mk.gov.lv>
Ministry of Agriculture
<http://www.zm.gov.lv>
Ministry of Culture
<http://www.km.gov.lv>
Ministry of Defense
<http://www.mod.gov.lv>
Ministry of Economics
<http://www.em.gov.lv>
Ministry of Education and Science
<http://www.izm.gov.lv>
Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development
<http://www.varam.gov.lv>
Ministry of Finance
<http://www.fm.gov.lv>
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<http://www.mfa.gov.lv>
Ministry of Health Care
<http://www.vm.gov.lv>
Ministry of Interior
<http://www.iem.gov.lv>
Ministry of Justice
<http://www.tm.gov.lv>
Ministry of Transport
<http://www.sam.gov.lv>
Ministry of Welfare
<http://www.lm.gov.lv>

Statistics

Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia,
statistics of Latvia
<http://www.csb.lv>

Tourism, Economics and Investment

Latvian Tourism Development Agency,
tourism information
<http://www.latvia.travel>
<http://www.tava.gov.lv>
Investment and Development Agency
of Latvia
<http://www.liaa.gov.lv>

Culture

visual arts
<http://www.gallery.lv>
music
<http://www.music.lv>
theater and dance
<http://www.theatre.lv>
literature
<http://www.literature.lv>
opera
<http://www.opera.lv>

Museums

Latvian Museum Association, Museum
Guide
<http://www.muzeji.lv>

Libraries

Latvian National Library, electronic
catalogue
<http://www.lnb.lv>

Archives and Genealogy

Directorate General of Latvia's State
Archives (includes genealogical inquiries)
<http://www.arhivi.lv>

Sports

Latvian Olympic Committee and sports-
related links
<http://www.lov.lv>

Nature

Nature of Latvia and nature-related links
<http://www.daba.lv>,
<http://www.dabasretumi.lv>

National and International news

Latvian News Agency LETA
<http://www.leta.lv>



THE LATVIAN INSTITUTE

The Latvian Institute promotes knowledge about Latvia abroad and works closely with international media in developing a wide variety of communications projects.

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